

## Chinese with Character

**By Alison Castle**

Years ago I lived in Japan. I went out to teach English as a foreign language, and my Japanese was pretty much non-existent when I arrived. I of course had my work cut out for me, and started taking private lessons. Within a few months I was getting the basics of getting around, saying hello, ordering food – the kind of survival stuff you need when you live in a foreign country. But, I had little time or motivation for learning characters...

Looking back on it, this was my number one mistake with Japanese – my listening and speaking skills were improving whilst my reading and writing were at a stand-still. About 18 months in I took a new job in Tokyo and was asked to improve my characters – especially recognition, so I did an intensive course for a month – several hours a day of just learning characters. And it was really, really painful – and moreover, a waste of time.

If I had to think of how much I actually retained over that period, well, I'd go for 25%. Not a good rate. And the reason is simple, I was learning most of them out of any context – just as individual words – not as part of a group of related vocabulary, or as part of any real-life dialogue or story. In retrospect, this approach my teacher took wasn't for me. It just didn't work.

So when I started learning Chinese I said to myself, 'whatever you do, don't make the same mistake with the characters as you did years ago with Japanese.' So, from the start I made sure that with every new word I learned I went through the process of:

- a. what's the pronunciation?
- b. what does it mean?
- c. can I recognise the character in and out of a written context ?
- d. how do I write it?

There's a lot to learning one piece of vocabulary in Chinese – it's a layered process – and much more difficult than say a romance language. But I'm persevering. I've been using *Discover China* in my adult learning classes and it really helps to stage the learning. Words are introduced in a controlled, gradual way and recycled through *all four skills*. Everything is natural, very day-to-day so you feel like you're learning key words that you'll need immediately.

So how about the pinyin? It's definitely a help and a hinder. On the one hand, I would find it very difficult at this elementary level to not have pinyin to work out the tones and as an aid to memory. On the other hand, when the pinyin is there, there is a tendency to rely on it, and not force yourself to read the characters. And this I think is one of the main challenges for teachers and learners. You need plenty of practice with characters as you begin to master them, without the pinyin support so you get used to seeing them in context.

If you're looking for something that will help do this, I recommend the Discover China Workbooks. This has been the most helpful tool for me to start mastering the characters because it naturally, gradually provides practice using just characters. The learner is then forced to complete exercises as gap fills, multiple choice, matching – either as a listening or reading – and get that important exposure without the help of pinyin. Plus, there's plenty of grid space to write each character and combination with clear notes on stroke order.

I've made it to Unit 8 in Discover China, and will pick up with Unit 9 after the summer. I reckon I've mastered a good 250 characters so far – I can read them, and write them and I feel comfortable with that. Plus, I know I'm not making the same mistakes that I made with Japanese. It may be a bit harder and require more work, but it's a much better way to do it.

So watch this space when I pick up with Unit 9! And, fingers crossed I'll have retained a lot more this time around.